Boundaries of the normal body: On hermaphrodites, medical classifications and control 1750-1850

The aim with this project has been to study how the Swedish medical discussion about normality and deviance considering sex and sexuality changed between 1750 and 1850. What did the meeting between physicians and people with ambiguous sex look like? In what way were the medicalisation of hermaphrodites, part of a cultural history of the modern individual as shaped by clear distinctions between the sexes and an increasingly more important heterosexual identity?

The three most important results from the project

The project shows that hermaphrodites in Swedish history have been discussed for a long time and that actual sexual ambiguities were observed in parish registration already during the seventeenth century. It was though not until the end of the eighteenth century that the hermaphrodite became an issue for medicine and by studying Swedish forensics and medical articles and reports it’s been possible to follow theories on ambiguous sex as well as actual meetings between hermaphrodites and physicians.

Here we can for example find one of the earliest cases of a hermaphroditic person in Swedish medicine, the painter Jonas Nilsson, who with his ambiguous body gave rise to a long-lasting discussion about the categories of sex. Nilsson’s meeting with science can bee seen as the start for a so called medicalisation of hermaphrodites in Sweden and the definitely most important result of this project is that it shows how this process looked like before 1850.

Not at least forensics and botany were in the Swedish context of great importance in the process when the hermaphrodite became of interest for science. Forensic medicine connect to one of the more ambitious aims with this project, namely to contribute to the internationally lively discussion about when and in what context medical notions of homosexuality arise as a meaningful contrast to the heterosexual norm.

Michel Foucault has pointed out that the homosexual individual succeed the hermaphrodite as the new monster-figure during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and this thought as also accompanied this project. Medical notions of lesbianism were actually formulated in Swedish forensic medicine already during the first part of the nineteenth century and interestingly so in relation to classifications and definitions of female hermaphrodites. The word ‘lesbisk’, has just as a normative discussion of female same-sex relations, in earlier research been considered to appear in Swedish language and culture much later.
In the project Carl von Linnaeus has been noticed for his early theory about how nature can be full of hermaphrodites among the plant while this condition is far more unusual among the animals. In earlier research, Linnaeus has been described as trapped in a heterosexual two-sex-model of thinking and unable to fully grasp the manifold forms of different sexes, sexualities and modes of generation. This thesis is interpreted in the project and the result is that it was just the other way around. Hermaphrodites was definitely a subject for the world famous botanist and the scientific language he used in his Systema naturae was even integrated in the medical understanding of human hermaphrodites during the early nineteenth century.

The two must important publications of the project

The two must important publications of the project is a monograph and an essay, of which the first mentioned has the working title The hermaphrodite and the politics of ambiguous sex in Swedish medicine (planned to be published during 2008). This book is foremost about the hermaphrodite in Swedish medicine during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century but it’s introduced by a chapter about the hermaphrodite as a symbol for gods and monsters in European culture before the eighteenth century. In myths, religious narratives, philosophy and science the hermaphrodite has been discussed from the Classical Antiquity and on and at the same time been seen as both a symbol for an androgynous God and as a monstrous portent. The first chapter in the book also contains a discussion of early definitions of the word hermaphrodite in seventeenth century Swedish culture.

Hermaphrodites were before the eighteenth century not yet a subject for systematic interpretation in Swedish science while so called hermaphrodite can be found in the parish registration since the seventeenth century. In 1787 though, Jonas Nilsson appears in medical sources and physicians became interested in his unusual body for at least a couple of generations. When medicine started to include hermaphrodites in reports, theories and interpretations, follows also a thorough classification of ambiguous sex. Around year 1800 physicians generally assume that there are female hermaphrodites, male hermaphrodites, sexless hermaphrodites and, in early forensic handbooks, also double-sexed hermaphrodites.

The medicalisation of the hermaphrodite meant that the double-sexed, or real, hermaphrodite which had been described in different genres ever since the Classical Antiquity got replaced by a pseudo-hermaphrodite or a false hermaphrodite, who only seemed to be both male and female. From about year 1800, a body was seldom seen as both male and female and the hermaphrodite slowly disappears from the human mind. In Swedish medicine, this can be seen in forensic handbooks from 1769-1852.
The monograph deals foremost with the question of how ambiguous sex in Swedish history became a subject for science and this incorporation of course differ in many ways from the situation in for example France or England. As earlier mentioned, medicine and botany were closely related disciplines in the Swedish tradition, which is discussed in a chapter about Carl von Linnaeus systematisation of plants and how his classificatory terminology got used, not only in theories about plants but also about human hermaphrodites.

An important person in early eighteenth century Swedish medicine is the professor in anatomy, Anders Retzius and his meetings with hermaphrodites are analyzed in the project just as more theoretical theories on the subject. Groundbreaking theories of the French zoologist, Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, for example, reached Swedish science in the 1830’ies. His theory about physical deviances legitimised the thought of the hermaphrodite, not as a transgressing double-being, but as a result of a process of arrested development. Perhaps could anatomical pathologies say science something about the normal body in its earliest shapes?

When the study finishes around 1850 there is though an often mentioned case about “a women who has been seen as a genus masculinum” that Swedish physicians not yet agreed about hermaphrodites. The medical language was still far from uniform and judgements of ambiguous sex diverged between different physicians. Much attention was paid to the social class and lifestyle of hermaphrodites and medical thoughts about sex, sexuality and gender often intersected in a crucial way.

In the project medical notions of physical deviances have also been analysed from a more general perspective and generated an essay about monstrous bodies. It’s called Understanding the monstrous body: Unusual births in Swedish eighteenth and early nineteenth century and the most important result in this study is that it shows how the monstrous body is disciplined by medicine in the early nineteenth century. The paradoxical bodies with too few, too many or unusually shaped body parts, which earlier challenged the boundary between human and animal, me and you, body and soul got demystified and understood by rational science.

**New questions of research, generated by the project**

The bodies of the hermaphrodite and the monster in are in this project analysed in an early phase of Swedish medical history and interpretations of other periods and genres are welcomed. Are there for example any hermaphrodites in the legal history of the seventeenth and eighteenth century? The legal status of hermaphrodites is discussed in this project but it could also be relevant to study if hermaphrodites appeared in court cases. The history of the concept hermaphrodite could also be interesting to develop. How has the word ‘hermaphrodite’ been used in Swedish language and what different
meanings has it had? What systems of order has this paradoxical transgressor of the sexes challenged? Is it just as Foucault suggested so that the homosexual individual succeeded the hermaphrodite as the premier monster of the nineteenth century?

In history of science and ideas, the body is an active field of research and with this project the questions are broadened towards physical deviances as they have been understood in Swedish medicine. The project shows how physical irregularities became anatomical pathologies and from this knowledge follows a number of important questions for further research such as the common notion that unusual bodies should be aborted, operated on or cured. An important issue is to analyse how Swedish physicians have approached questions like these during the period 1850-2000.